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## Think you're healthy? Most do

But some trends may contradict that belief, state survey finds.

By Dorsey Griffith -- Bee Medical Writer

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Most Californians believe they are in excellent health, but a sweeping survey released Thursday highlights some trends that appear to contradict their optimism.

More than half of California adults are overweight or obese, for example, and the prevalence of asthma among adults jumped 9 percent in just two years, from 2001 to 2003, the California Health Interview Survey found.

The survey of more than 42,000 adults, 4,000 teens and 8,500 children looked at a range of health indicators, from kids' daily soda intake to colon cancer screening rates and the use of hormone replacement therapy by post-menopausal women.

"The survey is very useful," said Greg Franklin, deputy director of health information and strategic planning with the Department of Health Services, which contracted with the UCLA Center for Health Policy to do the study. "We use it as a policy tool in terms of understanding the health status and access to care of California's diverse population."

Of note, the report found that 80 percent of adults, nearly 90 percent of adolescents and 93 percent of children rated their own health as good, very good or excellent.

"I think the notion of health is probably the absence of disease," explained Sue Holtby, a lead author and senior research scientist with the Public Health Institute. "With indicators such as body weight, there has probably been a shift over time in what people think 'normal' is."

Holtby cited, for example, the obesity and overweight rates for California adults, which far exceed the federal government's goals set for the year 2010.

In California, 55.6 percent of adult respondents had a body mass index, or BMI, of more than 25. A healthy adult BMI, calculated using height and weight, is defined as greater than 18.5 but less than 25.

Latinos, Indian and Alaska natives and African Americans in the study had the highest percentages of being overweight or obese, with 66 percent, 64.2 percent and 65.5 percent respectively.

Holtby said the same patterns emerged among teens, a reflection of earlier findings. Additionally, the most important factor determining a teen's likelihood of being overweight or obese is having an overweight or obese parent.

The study found one positive development in the fight against childhood obesity: The percentage of 12- to 14-year-olds who participated in "vigorous physical activity" three or more days in the week before the interview jumped from 65 percent in 2001 to 71 percent in 2003.

"We are hoping this translates to a decrease in the obesity rate in 2005," Holtby said.

The survey findings, released every two years, reflect results from telephone interviews done during 2003. A follow-up survey with 2005 data will be released later this year.

While there were relatively few statistically significant changes reported between 2001 and 2003, a couple of trends stand out.

Among them: adult asthma rates. Although young adults, ages 18-24, had the highest prevalence of asthma (14.8 percent), asthma among adults ages 25-39 jumped nearly 17 percent between 2001 and 2003.

Although the survey does not probe possible explanations for the increases, Dr. Arif Seyal, an allergist and asthma specialist with Kaiser Permanente who is president of the Sacramento Emigrant Trails chapter of Breathe California, suggests the reasons are twofold.

First, Seyal said, the disease is now easier to diagnose and to treat. "In the past, patients would go on having coughs for months and years and be treated as if they had bronchitis," he said. "And now that we have better modalities of treatment, patients aren't afraid of being diagnosed with asthma. In the old days, it was a taboo."

The other reason for the jump, he said, is unchecked air pollution, particularly in the Central Valley, where asthma rates are highest. "The bottom line here is, let's look at our environment and control air pollution," he said. "If we don't start doing something about it, asthma is going to get worse."

Among the bright spots in the health survey: while overall rates of uninsured adults remained the same at 17 percent, the rate dropped by 19 percent among Asians. Latinos, meanwhile, continued to have highest percentage of uninsured adults, at 34 percent.

In women's health, two findings stand out, both the result of changes in medicine and health policy.

In one case, the rate of post-menopausal women using hormone replacement therapy dropped by 47 percent in 2003 as compared with 2001. The shift reflects the 2002 discovery that healthy women had higher risks of breast cancer, heart disease, stroke and blood clots after taking a drug called Prempro compared with women taking a sugar pill, or placebo.

Also, while more than three-fourths of women had heard of emergency contraception, only 12 percent knew that it can be obtained over the counter, without a prescription. Emergency contraception, which prevents pregnancy after intercourse, remains controversial nationally. California state law, however, allows over-the-counter sales of the drug by pharmacists with special training. A law passed last year requires pharmacists who do not want to dispense the drug to offer alternative pharmacy assistance to anyone asking for it.

"There have been a lot of mixed messages," said Katharyn McLearan, spokesperson for Planned Parenthood Mar Monte. "It's an education process. As more people know about it, it becomes more accessible."

The full survey report can be found at [www.chis.ucla.edu](http://www.chis.ucla.edu).

#### **About the writer:**

The Bee's Dorsey Griffith can be reached at (916) 321-1089 or [dgriffith@sacbee.com](mailto:dgriffith@sacbee.com).